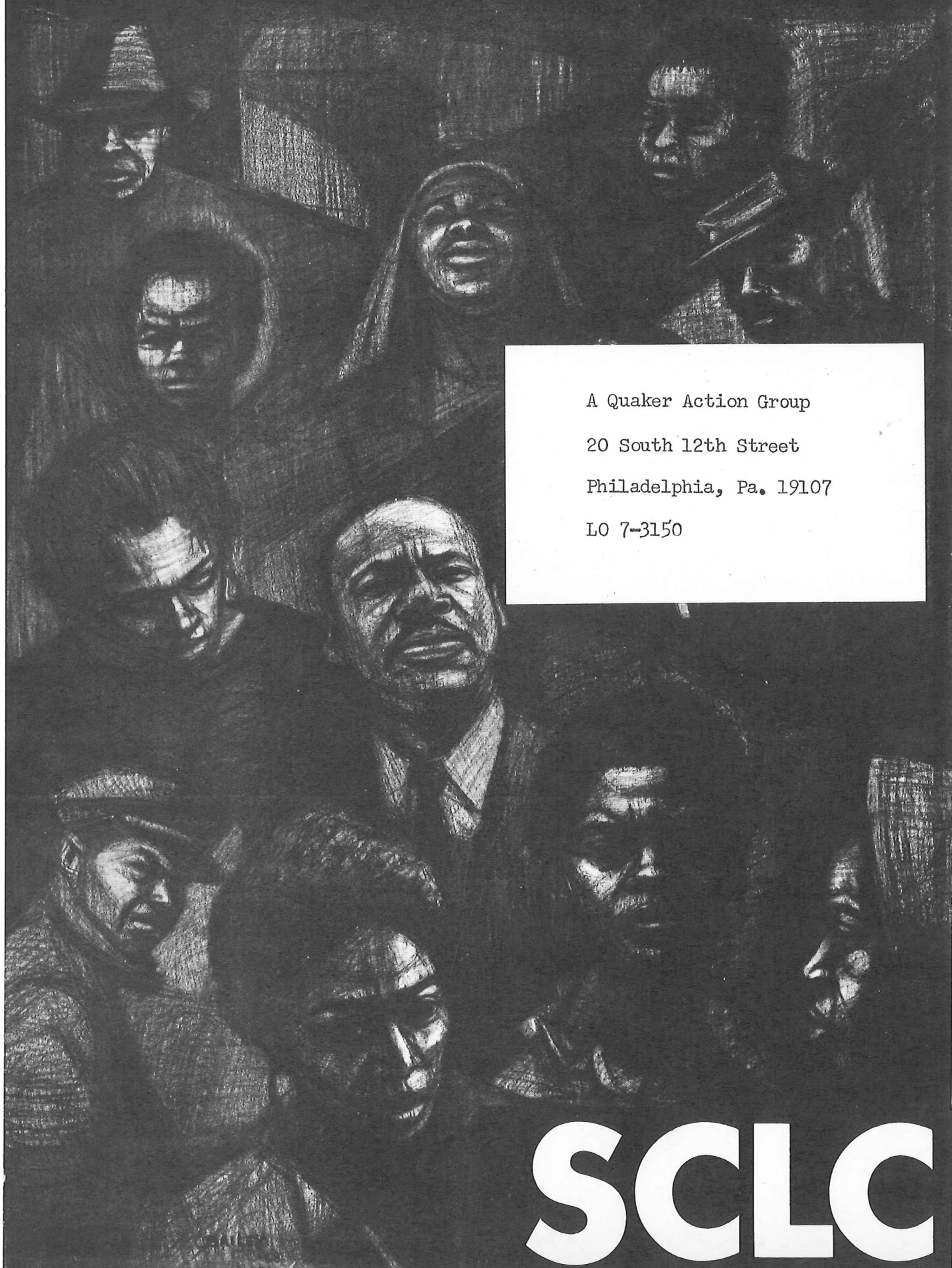


POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN 1968



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Poverty and War - M.L. KING

An Address by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
 National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace
 University of Chicago
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THE DOMESTIC IMPACT OF THE WAR IN AMERICA

This question is historic because it is an expression of the authentic conscience of the labor movement. Tens of millions of Americans oppose the war in Vietnam. Never in our history has there been such a passionate and enormous popular resistance to a current war. In addition to the millions upon millions of ordinary people, eminent scholars, distinguished senators, journalists, businessmen, professionals, students, and political leaders at all levels have protested the war and offered alternatives with an amazing tenacity and boldness. But one voice was missing--the loud, clear voice of labor. The absence of that one voice was all the more tragic because it may be the decisive one for tipping the balance towards peace. Labor has been missing--for too long the moral appeal has been flickering, not shining as it did in its dynamic days of growth.

This conference--a united expression of varied branches of labor--reaffirms that the Trade Union Movement is part of forward looking America; that no matter what the formal resolutions of higher bodies may state, the troubled conscience of the working people cannot be stilled. This conference speaks for millions. You here today will long be remembered as those who had the courage to speak out and the wisdom to be right.

It is noteworthy that the Labor Party of Great Britain, which of course has no responsibility for our actions, none-the-less went on record on October 4th in a formal national resolution calling upon its labor government to "Dissociate itself completely from U.S. policy in Vietnam." It urged its government to persuade the U.S. "to end the bombing of North Vietnam immediately, permanently, and unconditionally."

What are some of the domestic consequences of the war in Vietnam? It has made the Great Society a myth and replaced it with the troubled and confused society. The war has strengthened domestic reaction. It has given the extreme right, the anti-labor, anti-Negro and anti-humanistic forces a weapon of spurious patriotism to galvanize its supporters into reaching for power right up to the White House. It hopes to use national frustration to take control and restore the America of social insecurity and power for the privileged. When a Hollywood performer, lacking distinction even as an actor, can become a leading war hawk candidate for the presidency only the irrationalities induced by a war psychosis can explain such a melancholy turn of events.

The war has produced a shameful order of priorities in which the decay, squalor and pollution of the cities are neglected even though seventy percent of our population now lives in them. The war has smothered and nearly extinguished the beginnings of progress toward racial justice. The war has created the bizarre spectacle of armed forces of the United States fighting in ghetto streets of America while they are fighting in jungles in Asia. The war has so increased Negro frustration and despair that urban outbreaks are now an ugly feature of the American scene. How can the Administration with quivering anger denounce the violence of ghetto Negroes when it has given an example of violence in Asia that shocks the world. The users of naval guns, millions of tons of bombs, and revolting napalm cannot speak to Negroes about violence. Only those who are fighting for peace have the moral authority to lecture on non-violence. I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not equating Negro violence with the war. In fact, the Negroes in the ghetto, goaded and infuriated by discrimination and neglect, have for the most part deliberately avoided harming people. They

have destroyed property, but even in the grip of rage the vast majority have vented their anger on inanimate things, not people. If destruction of property is deplorable, what is the word for the use of napalm on people. What would happen to Negroes if they not only set fires but killed people in the vicinity and explained blandly that some non-combatants had to die as a matter of course, Negroes would be called savages if we were so callous, but for generals it is military tactics.

The priorities of the administration and Congress are dramatically illustrated in the case with which 70 billions are appropriated for war while 2 billion can scarcely be rung from the unwilling hands of Congress for anti-poverty programs. In the past two months unemployment has increased approximately 15%. At this moment tens of thousands of people in anti-poverty programs are being abruptly thrown out of jobs and training programs to search in a diminishing job market for work and survival. The inflation of the war cuts the pay of the employed. Inflation has stopped creeping and has begun running. Working people feel the double impact of inflation and unemployment immediately. But Negroes feel its impact with crushing severity because they live on the margin in all respects and have no reserve to cushion shocks.

There is a great deal of debate about the nation's ability to maintain war and commit the billions required to attack poverty--the poverty of tens of millions that will not vanish even in an 800 billion dollars economy.

Theoretically, the United States has resources for both but an iron logic dictates that we shall never voluntarily do both for two reasons:

First, the majority of the present Congress and the Administration, as distinguished from the majority of the people, is singlemindedly devoted to the pursuit of the war. It has been estimated that we spend approximately \$500,000 to kill a single enemy soldier in Viet Nam, and yet we spend about \$53.00 for each impoverished American in anti-poverty programs. Congress appropriates military funds with alacrity and generosity. It appropriates poverty funds with miserlyness and grudging reluctance. The government is emotionally committed to the war; it is emotionally hostile to the needs of the poor.

Second, the government will resist committing adequate resources for domestic reform because these are reserves indispensable for military adventure. The logic of war requires that a nation deploy its wealth for immediate combat and simultaneously that it maintain substantial reserve. It will resist any diminishing of its military power through draining off of resources for the social good.

This is the inescapable contradiction between war and social progress at home. Military adventures must stultify domestic progress to insure the certainty of military success. This is the reason the poor and particularly Negroes have a double stake in peace and international harmony.

This is not to say it is useless to fight for domestic reform. On the contrary as people discover in the struggle what is impeding their progress they comprehend the full and real cost of the war to them in their daily lives.

Another tragic consequence of the war domestically is its destructive effect on the younger generation. There cannot be enough sympathy for those who are sent into battle. More and more it is revealed how many of our soldiers cannot understand the purpose of their sacrifice. It is harrowing under any circumstance to kill, but it is psychologically devastating to be forced to kill when one doubts that it is right.

Beyond the tragedy at the front, at home the young people are torn with confusions which tend to explain most of the extremes of their conduct. This generation has never known a severe economic crisis but it has known something far worse. It is the first generation in American History to experience four wars in twenty-five years: World War II, The Cold War, The Korean War, and the War in Viet Nam. It is the generation of wars and it shows the scars in widespread drug consumption, alienation, and feverish pursuit of sensual pleasures. Yet, we cannot call this generation of the young the lost generation. We are the lost generation, because it is we who fail to give them the peaceful society they were promised as the American Heritage.

Finally, the whole nation is living in a triple-ring of isolation and alienation. The government is isolated from the majority of the people who want either withdrawal, de-escalation or honest negotiations, not what they are now given-- steady intensification of the conflict. When a major city, San Francisco, in a referendum votes 37% for immediate withdrawal this is a stunning rebuke to the government. If young people between 18 and 21 could have voted they alone might have been a majority.

But even more significantly, if the question had not offered only an extreme choice of immediate withdrawal, but included some of the many alternatives the government has rejected, no one could doubt that a substantial majority would have repudiated Washington's policy. This is the position stated by the new Mayor of San Francisco. In addition, to the isolation of the government from its people there is our national isolation in the world. We are without a single significant international ally. Every major nation has avoided active involvement on our side. We are more alone than we have been since the founding of the Republic. Lastly and more ironically, we are isolated from the very people whom we profess to support, the South Vietnamese. In their elections the pro-war forces received less than one-third of the vote. In the countryside, most of the area of South Viet Nam is in the hand of the Vietcong and the army of South Viet Nam has so reduced its role in the fighting it may shortly become the first pacifist army on a war front. The war that began with a few thousand Americans as advisers has become almost totally an American war without the consent of the American people. This is an historic isolation that cannot be rationalized by self-righteousness or the revival of unproved dangers of imminent aggression from China. China's incredible internal turmoil suggests it presently threatens only itself.

The war domestically has stimulated a profound discussion of the nature of our government. Important members of Congress and distinguished political scientists are questioning the trend toward excessive executive powers. Senator George McGovern has summed up these views in the following words: "Congress must never again surrender its power under our constitutional system by permitting an ill-advised undeclared war of this kind. Our involvement in South Viet Nam came about through a series of moves by the executive branch---each one seemingly restrained and yet each one setting the stage for a deeper commitment. The complex of administration moves involving the state department, the C.I.A., the Pentagon, A.I.D., and various private interests-- all of these have played a greater role than has Congress. Congress cannot be proud of its function in the dreary history of this steadily widening war. That function has been one largely of acquiescence in little understood administrative efforts. The surveillance, the debate and the dissent since 1965, while courageous and admirable, came too late in the day to head off the foolish course chartered by our policymakers. For the future, the Senator concludes, members of Congress and the Administration will do well to heed the admonition of Edmund Burke, a distinguished legislator of an earlier day: "A conscientious man would be cautious how he dealt in blood."

The nature of our government is also under scrutiny by the young generation. I have spoken in recent years before hundreds of thousands of young people in their colleges, in the slums, and in churches and synagogues. Their comments and questions reflect a sharply rising body of opinion that the inability to influence government to adopt urgent reforms is not a consequence of any superficial ignorance, lethargy, or prejudice but is systemic. There is more serious discussion today about basic structural change in our society than I can recall over a decade.

We have thus far avoided a recrudescence of McCarthyism. It is constantly threatening but it has not yet been able to gain a secure foothold. It is not for lack of trying by the ubiquitous congressional committees. They are trying to bring down a blanket of intimidation, but a healthy resistance holds them in check. We must constantly be alert to this danger because if it s evil is added to all the others we will have opened the door to other national disasters.

It is worth remembering that there is a strong strain of dissent in the American tradition even in time of war.

During the Mexican War the intellectual elite of the nation, Emerson, Thoreau, and many others were withering critics of National Policy. In the Congress a relatively unknown young Congressman was Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. At the same time a young army lieutenant almost decided to resign his commission to protest the war. His name was Ulysses Grant.

To close my remarks and to illustrate basic optimism, I would like to repeat these most appropriate words of a great labor leader, Eugene Debs, when he stood before the court to be sentenced for opposing World War I:

"I can see the dawn of a better day for humanity. The people awakening in due course of time, will come to their own. When the mariner sailing over tropic seas, looks for release from his weary watch, he turns his eye towards the Southern Cross bearing luridly above the tempest tossed ocean. As the midnight approaches, the Southern Cross begins to bend, then the whirling worlds choose their places, and with starry fingerpoints, the almighty marks the page of time upon the dial of the universe, and though no bell may beat the glad tiding, the lookout knows the midnight is passing--that relief and rest are close at hand. Let the people take heart and hope everywhere for the cross is bending, the midnight is passing and joy cometh with the morning."